THE POWER OF ABSTRACTION: BRENTANO, HUSSERL AND THE GÖTTINGEN STUDENTS

Neb Kujundzic (University of Prince Edward Island)

A quick look into the index of Brentano’s Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint reveals that all references to “abstract terms” occur only in the appendix (taken from Brentano’s “Nachlass” essays). What should we make of this? Was it the case that the inquiry into abstract, as well as non-existent, objects came as an afterthought to Brentano? Or was he all too aware of the consequences of such investigations? Furthermore, was it largely the absence of such inquiry that prompted Husserl and his early students in Göttingen, such as Daubert and Reinach, to develop a deep ontological commitment to entities he refers to as “abstract” or “ideal”?

Franz Brentano, a highly influential philosopher and innovative contributor to modern descriptive psychology, made many notable contributions to the early inquiry into mental activities and contents. It is a matter of some curiosity, however, that he did not find it necessary to address the mental process of abstraction in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint.*1 The only references to “abstract terms” or “abstraction” occur in “Appendix II” of the English translation, edited by Oscar Kraus, and it was Kraus who saw fit to include them as an appendix to the 1924 edition. The essays included there were composed between 1911 and 1917, the year of Brentano’s death, and in them Brentano covers topics such as intuition, concepts and what he calls “objects of reason” or “abstract terms.” The majority of the essays concerned with abstraction and included by Kraus were, in fact, written or dictated in the weeks leading up to Brentano’s death on 17 March 1917. Included was “Intuition and Abstract Presentation (Presentation with Intuitive and with Attributive Unity),” which was Brentano’s last dictation, given only eight days before his death. This is interesting to note because it seems that only near the end of his life did Brentano speak at some length about a topic he seemed to avoid during most of his academic life. But why did he wait so long to discuss a topic his students were all too eager to explore? What kept him from writing about abstract objects even when his reintroduction of the Aristotelian notion of intentionality, included in his robust psychological ontology, lent itself so naturally to a discussion of abstract objects? And was this newly found eagerness to explore abstract objects, which his students and later Husserl’s students in Göttingen keenly felt, inspired by Brentano’s avoidance of any discussion of abstract objects in his *Psychology?* These questions, and a brief journey through the ideas of the Adolf Reinach and Johannes Daubert, two Göttingen realist phenomenology students, will be the focus of this paper.

Brentano’s philosophical approach is best described as a synthesis of Cartesian, Aristotelian and empiricist ideas. As Barry Smith notes, “Brentano conceives descriptive psychology as a new sort of empirical science, with its own empirical technique, a technique resting on our capacity to notice psychological distinctions between different sorts of simple and complex mental acts, between the intuitive and non-intuitive components in psychic phenomena, between the various different sorts of phenomenally given qualities, boundaries and continua, and so on, and then also our capacity to grasp certain necessary and intelligible relations between the elements thus distinguished.”2 In their training for this descriptive psychology, Brentano’s students were required to accept what can only be called a version of Aristotelian scientific realism. At the foundation of this scientific realism was Brentano’s empiricism, a belief that necessary relations could be grasped through what is given to us in experience. Unlike the positivists of his time, Brentano thought that the evidence for general laws was present in experience and that such evidence could serve as the basis for true scientific knowledge. (AP, 32) Some of the basic principles of Brentano’s empiricist philosophy, which his students had to accept, maintained that empirical methods were adequate to capture the given elements of reality that were necessary for description. This meant that descriptive psychology should never resort to abstract models of the phenomena present in consciousness, but rather, should deal only with things themselves. Finally, Brentano strongly supported the notion of a unified science that included psychology, which amounted to a rejection both of the German metaphysics of his time and of Dilthey’s notion that human sciences were distinct from natural sciences because the former required a special method of understanding (over explanation). (AP, 30) While the existence of the external world, for Brentano, was at best probable, and most likely not identi-

---


The Power of Abstraction

cal to the world of our experience (making Brentano sound much like Hume), he believed that reality makes itself “felt” only in the structures of our mental activities.

Already, here, we see part of the answer as to why Brentano refused to discuss abstract objects—methodologically, abstract objects cannot be described or studied using empirical methods and are thus not the proper objects of empirical science. Abstract objects are and must remain outside our experiential realm and capabilities, beyond our full understanding, and thus they cannot be included in a descriptive psychology that uses empirical scientific methods. Since Brentano was convinced that abstract models should never be used in the process of accounting for given phenomena (and one can assume that abstract models would be the most proper avenue for investigating abstract objects), we are left with no way to fully include abstract objects in the psychological ontology. One could raise an objection about mathematical objects or theories in physics dealing with space or quarks, all of which are included in science even though their objects and models are abstract. What we are left with is this question: Must empiricism imply reism? While on the surface the answer obviously appears to be “yes,” traditionally, many empiricist philosophers who have dealt with non-tangible things such as monads, souls, substance and God, have not been good reists. This question, as it pertains to Brentano, will be addressed after further investigation into his ideas, since his psychological ontology does not reasonably result in a position of reism.

At the heart of Brentano’s psychology and ontology was his reintroduction to philosophy of the Scholastic notion of “intentional inexistence.” It is impossible to ignore the fact that this notion comes with the implicit assumption that every mental act necessarily possesses an object of some kind: “Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on.” (PES, 88) During this period in his philosophical development, roughly from 1874 to 1907, Brentano admitted that mental contents, or what we can call “objects of thought,” constitute existing, non-real objects, and that they share this status with universals, possible things, lacks or negations, states of affairs, etc. Any of these can be given in presentation, and can be affirmed or denied in judgement. Hence, we see an ontological and theoretical distinction between existence and reality: what we say exists need not be real (e.g., values or universals), and what we denote as real need not exist (e.g., dinosaurs or Emperor Napoleon). Making existence and reality independent of each other may result in (among other things) enabling existence to be directly involved with nothing else but the exactness of judgements. However, even here we can see the potential roots of reism: the truth of a judgement must rely on some kind of reality for its verification, since we cannot say something is true if we do not know it in some way or come to understand elements of it. While values don’t have the material reality of tables and chairs, we do see values at work in reality—we see real-world examples of behaviour that society considers good and practical, we have codified laws based on values, religious books based on values, etc. The claims that what we denote as real need not exist shows a bias: real things that don’t exist presently did exist at one time, and there is usually evidence of such existence. So, we can make judgements about dinosaurs because we have evidence, empirical proof of their existence, but it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to judge as real anything that doesn’t yet exist because we have no idea what it will be. To try to make judgements about my great-great-grandchildren or beings from another universe is problematic since we cannot say they will be real, let alone that they will exist. But it suffices to say here that Brentano was not yet a committed reist, and even, at times, seemed not to be a loyal empiricist.

Around the period of 1907 to 1912, when Tadeusz Kotarbinski was in Lvov studying under Kazimierz Twardowski, Brentano made a diametrical theoretical shift by conceiving reality and existence as equivalent terms: things that exist are ens reale. (AP, 231) This shift in his thinking was known only to his closest associates and correspondents, most likely Anton Marty, Carl Stumpf and possibly Husserl, but was unknown to Kotarbinski himself. Here, Brentano’s reist position can be best understood as a reaction to the “ontological excesses” of his students, excesses which far surpassed any empirical boundaries and scientific methodology he taught them. In this new Brentanian theory, intentional relationships between the mind and abstract objects such as states of affairs, impossible objects, So-Sein and mental contents were even given a new status. In the time after the publication of his Psychology and leading up to his full commitment to reism, his students stretched the boundaries of his ideas about intentionality and ontology: Stumpf’s work on Sachverhalt (1888), certainly Alexius Meinong’s Logik (in collaboration with Alois Höfler, 1890) and Gegenstandssteorie (1899, 1904) and, of course, Husserl’s Logical Investigations (1900)—all spoke of abstraction. As to why Brentano waited so long to address abstract objects, it is quite possible that he just didn’t feel the need to address the subject until the pressure became too great: aware that everyone was using his notion of intentionality to talk about abstract things, taking his empiricist ideas and using them
to launch robust ontologies, perhaps he felt compelled to take back control and show them that their various ontological projects were absurd. This kind of attitude was demonstrated by his hostility toward Meinong, as well as the indifference he showed toward Husserl after the publication of Logical Investigations. By the time Brentano wrote his essays dealing with abstract objects, he was reacting not only to his own students’ writings on the topic, but to the students of his former students as well. And these students had conceived of a realist ontology that was able to describe and even reach an understanding of abstract objects.

Looking at the last paragraph, one might ask a perfectly legitimate question: “We began by talking about Brentano’s empiricist psychology, the idea of a unified science and such, and we ended up talking about wildly diverse ontologies of abstract objects. How is this even possible?” In order to bridge this gap between philosophical stances and methodologies, we need to step back and begin anew by looking at what Brentano wrote on abstraction:

I answer that this is explained by the fact that not every word in our language taken by itself means something. Many of them signify something only in combination with others. Propositions and conjunctions are proof of this. And besides this, one must take account of the fact that language makes use of many fictions for the sake of brevity; in mathematics, for example, we speak of negative quantities less than zero, or fractions of one, of irrational and imaginary numbers, and the like, which are treated exactly like numbers in the strict and proper sense. And so language has abstract as well as concrete terms and uses them in many ways as if they referred to things which are parts of the relevant concrete entity. It also says of the abstraction that it is and is in the concrete thing. (PES, 322–23, emphasis in the original)

Even though Brentano ties abstract terms to the “economy of language” to our habit of continuing to treat complex mathematical configurations as numbers and forgetting that they are not really numbers, the reader is tempted to see this discussion as revealing only the tip of a huge iceberg. What could Brentano mean by saying that abstract terms are to be found in “concrete things”? Roderick Chisholm proposes the following answer to this question:

Here words ostensibly designating abstract objects are convenient “fictions” (Brentano also calls them “abbreviations”); the sentences in which they occur may be translated into other sentences whose terms refer only to “genuine objects”—to individual concrete things.3

In the context of Brentano’s legacy, as well as Chisholm’s reading of his legacy, one can only surmise that Brentano held the process of generating abstract ideas to be akin to the model proposed by Locke and other British empiricists. I believe that Brentano’s approach to abstraction must have been similar to the empiricist account precisely because of Brentano’s intentionality thesis. According to the basic principles of this thesis, the mind is constantly “targeting” its intentional objects, and it must therefore be capable of targeting them, at various times, in various manners, on various levels. It does not matter whether or not mental activities fall under presentations, judgments or so-called “phenomena of interest.” Karl Schuhmann, in his discussion of early Daubertian phenomenology, touches on the latter category of Brentanian mental activities:

Wishes, desires, strivings, all belong to one and the same class of psychic phenomena, called by the Brentanians the class of “phenomena of interest.” Brentano asserted of such phenomena—and Daubert follows him on this point—that they essentially and always permit of qualitative opposites. Thus they are characteristically designated by paired expressions—“phenomena of love and hate,” “phenomena of pleasure and displeasure,” etc.—which serve as a means of drawing attention to this polarity. These oppositions are, as Brentano points out, not a matter of any contrast between the objects of feeling acts. They are oppositions in the relation toward the object.4

Once the mind takes the trouble to remove all interests, emotions and dispositions, as well as all accidental features from its targets (real or not, existent or not), there must remain some kind of abstract core in the reflecting mind. The only problem is, what exactly is that abstract core, and what status does it have in the thinking mind?

One of the most interesting developments in Austrian philosophy, which occurred among Husserl and several other key disciples of Brentano, came out of the need to seriously examine this model of generating abstract ideas. In the early twentieth-century tradition of Austrian philosophy, there began to emerge a number of radically

3 Roderick Chisholm, Realism and the Background of Phenomenology (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960), 5.
different understandings of abstraction. Perhaps, it was suggested, the process of forming abstract ideas is not a psychological process at all, and perhaps the mind cannot claim “ownership” of abstract ideas. Or perhaps, as Daubert believed, abstraction is a configuration which can arise in consciousness only through constant and thorough entanglement with reality? Or, as Reinach believed, perhaps abstraction is a matter of inquiry into *a priori* configurations implicit in states of affairs? Indeed, some of these questions are reflected in several notorious examples involving the process of the creation as well as the ontological status of abstract ideas, whereby such notions *prima facie* seem inaccessible and inseparable to the reflecting mind: infinity, the idea of nothingness and certain self-contradictory ideas, to name just a few.

In the journey of critically examining Brentano’s blind spot with respect to abstract terms, the first station is to be found in Husserl’s early work, most notably his *Logical Investigations*. In order to elucidate the basic tenets of Husserl’s approach to abstraction, it is best to sketch his theory of perception. As is frequently mentioned in the literature, Husserl’s theory of perception has always been the anchor in his organic triad of perception, judgement and imagination. However, for Husserl, every act of perception is always an intentional act whereby the object which is intended (and not the object which independently exists in reality) becomes an ideal entity. Husserl termed the latter entity *noema*. As Karl Schuhmann points out, Husserl believed that although the noema and its corresponding real object must be identical in what is given, they are radically different within the context of perception. Thus, a perceived tree (existing in my consciousness) and the real tree cannot be one and the same entity. For the sake of illustration, Husserl would probably say that, while the real tree can be cut down and burned in order to survive extreme cold, the perceived tree offers no such comfort. The upshot of this assumption is enormous. Perhaps most important, because consciousness may become “pure” or “absolute” as a corollary of its detachment from reality, Husserl’s entire project of phenomenology slid toward idealism: “It is in imaginative or hypothetical thinking, in neutralization or reduction, when consciousness seems to withdraw in different ways from contact with reality, that it acquires a pseudo-being of its own.”

---


Indeed, at this juncture, one is struck by Husserl’s radical departure from his teacher. As Brentano made clear in the opening paragraph of his *Psychology*, abstract terms always reside in concrete things. For Husserl, the task of phenomenology is, among other things, to fathom the deep and often hidden structures in the totality of human experience. Some of these structures, which function in a manner akin to perception, are relegated to a level of non-sensory intuition. Husserl termed this type of observing *Wesensschau*, which is aimed at discovering formal essences. In a letter to Brentano, Husserl, illustrating his departure from his teacher’s faith in the empirical realm, wrote the following:

We stand not within the realm of nature, but within that of Ideas, not within the realm of empirical…generalities, but within that of the ideal, apodictic, general system of laws, not within the realm of causality, but within that of rationality…. Pure logical, mathematical laws are laws of essence....

To many of Husserl’s disciples, this kind of departure from Brentano, even if justified by Husserl’s desire to avoid psychologism, amounted to a dangerous flight into idealism. I will briefly sketch how the two most notable of Husserl’s Göttingen students, Johannes Daubert and Adolf Reinach, reacted to the challenge of idealism. At this point, I must note that I am focussing on only a few aspects in a much larger and richer picture. As Kimberly Baltzer-Jaray points out, several of Husserl’s students expressed their misgivings about their teacher’s solutions, especially regarding his theory of meaning:

It is important to mention that Husserl’s work was not uncritically or unconditionally received by the Munich group; the students had misgivings about §§69 and 70 of the Sixth Investigation, specifically with the distinctions Husserl had drawn between statements expressing judgment, wishing, questioning, and commanding, and how these different types of grammatical constructions come to have meaning.

Johannes Daubert, one of the keenest and most influential readers of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, sought to correct Husserl’s tendencies to separate consciousness from reality and to transform the former...
The Power of Abstraction

into some sort of a self-subsisting realm. For Daubert, turning consciousness into a pseudo-entity meant creating a slippery slope toward a sort of idealism that detaches cognition from reality and eventually turns the former into a Platonic chimera:

Daubert’s denial of a self-subsisting layer of senses whose ties to reality could be loosened or even—in a reduction—dispensed with entirely, has far-reaching consequences. For it will prove that consciousness “exists” only when and insofar as it is involved in this reality. One cannot ascribe to consciousness any existence of its own, independent of this immediate connection with the natural world. (AI, §3)

Yet another disciple of Husserl, Adolf Reinach, saw the significant role that the a priori plays in reality. Unlike Husserl, however, Reinach set upon discovering essences not in the idealised system of laws, sharply detached from reality, but precisely in the states of affairs:

It is grounded in the nature of the straight line as a straight line to be the shortest line of connection. Here is a necessary-being-so. Hence, this is the essential point: states of affairs are a priori in that the predication in them—the being B, let us say—is required by the essence of the A; that is, in that the predication is necessarily grounded in that essence. But “states of affairs” are there indifferently of which consciousness apprehends them, and of whether they are apprehended by any consciousness at all.8

Reinach’s introduction of “material necessity” arose from his innovative and daring reading of Hume’s analysis of the a priori. In contrast to Hume, who limited the a priori to a narrow scope of formal reasoning, Reinach expanded a priori configurations, which he termed “material,” to include the entire universe. His states of affairs served the role of accommodating this vast nexus of a priori configurations. It quickly becomes evident that Reinach envisioned his realist ontology as a way to found a new brand of phenomenology and to effectively inquire into what he termed “essential laws.”

This journey through the transformation of abstraction in post-Brentanian Austrian philosophy has been motivated by the thesis that Brentano, for extremely significant methodological reasons, skirted the issue of abstraction, while Husserl, in his desire to forestall what


he saw as the challenge of psychologism posed by his teacher, opened the gates to idealism by enabling abstraction to inhabit its own hypothetical realm, a realm ontologically detached from reality. It fell, then, upon Husserl’s disciples Daubert and Reinach to offer methodological solutions, which they saw as necessary for the proper evolution of phenomenology, in order to reconnect abstraction with reality.

nkujundzic@upei.ca